

A New Year's Resolution: Make Every Breath Count

Category: Healing

written by Jyoti Puvvula | February 4, 2021

As the final hours of 2020 approach, I try to tie up the loose ends as I sign over our busy inpatient service to the next attending physician. As I do so, my mind begins reflecting on the first nine months of this pandemic.

The hardest part has not been the hassle of donning and doffing the PPE. Nor, figuring out how to optimize drug dosages to best treat patients with COVID. The hardest parts are these: finding inner quiet among the incessant overhead rapid response alerts; learning to treat the loneliness and despair visible in my patients' eyes; and, when treatment fails, helping them die in dignity.

Those are the hardest parts for me as a physician. As a parent, the hardest part is learning to be fully present—even in my despair—for my own child, who is navigating puberty, social isolation and loneliness.

These nine months have taught me many lessons.

I'm reminded how complex we humans are. Some of my patients, paralyzed by fear of the virus, have completely isolated themselves. Others, triggered by fear of isolation, indulge in reckless social behaviors. In caring for my patients, I've found myself navigating these extremes.

The second lesson I've learned is that we humans are meant to live in community. A community that has been there to help raise my child, to offer meals after a busy work day, and just being available when I was on the verge of tears from bearing witness to the death and dying around me.

The epidemic has also taught me how capable we are of solving problems if we have the will and the resolve to do so. When we pooled our knowledge to create a COVID vaccine at light speed, it gave me confidence that we humans might one day end the most enduring of pandemics we face: the pandemics of poverty and racism.

I am not one to make New Year's resolutions, but I am grateful to all the patients who fought until their last breath to see their loved ones just one more time. You taught me how precious each breath is. You taught me to make each breath count.

The year 2020 is now in the books. I've signed over the long list of patients and walked out of the hospital into the quiet, dark evening. I am grateful to feel the cold air on my face, to take another breath, and to be able to see my child again. I sit in my car mentally exhausted and finally, without holding back, let all the tears flow.

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